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ABSTRACT

This study explored the perceptions of whole language instruction held by a group of teachers of young children. Four questions framed the study: (1) How do teachers of young children define a whole language program? (2) What kind of whole language activities have the teachers tried in their classroom, and how did teachers feel about the outcomes of the activities they used? (3) What concerns did the teachers have about whole language instruction? and (4) What kind of assistance did the teachers believe would be helpful to them as they began to make changes in their literacy program? A survey was designed to assess a general level of knowledge and concerns about whole language programs among kindergarten-second grade teachers teaching in a rural or a suburban midwestern school district. Twenty-eight surveys were returned. One finding suggests that most teachers from this small sample accept whole language instruction as being an effective means of instruction, but as a supplement to a skills-based approach. It seems imperative that whole language advocates address teachers' beliefs concerning how children become literate. Without doing so, whole language activities may be viewed as additional instructional experiences which are "fun" but not a means for developing capable literate children. (One table of data is included; an appendix contains the survey.) (SR)

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Kindergarten and Primary Teachers' Perceptions of Whole Language Instruction

Running Head: Teachers' Perceptions

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Kindergarten and Primary Teachers' Perceptions of Whole Language Literacy Learning

In an important article surveying research on young children's development of reading and writing, William Teale, (1987) wrote he believed many early childhood teachers would welcome the new reading research which proposes children learn literacy in an active, playful fashion, an approach towards teaching long embraced by teachers of young children. Findings from the emergent literacy research-base advocate active playful learning indicating that children develop an understanding of written language through daily encounters with functional usage of print (Goodman & Goodman, 1979; Harste, Burke, & Woodward, 1982); through reading texts in which comprehension and construction of meaning becomes the dominant focus (Goodman & Goodman, 1981); and, through learning to write through the process of developing their own systems of invented spellings (Bissex, 1980; Dyson, 1982; Read, 1975). Important print knowledge is learned through the active processes of constructing and testing hypotheses concerning written language (Bissex, 1980; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982) and through the social interactions children enjoy as they engage in literacy events with parents, teachers, and children (Teale, 1982). An early childhood literacy program based on whole language research findings would offer children opportunities to read favorite stories, to develop

an understanding of letter-sound relationships through writing their own meaningful messages, and, to engage in written language as a useful part of daily classroom experiences.

This whole language approach to literacy learning stands in marked contrast to the type of instruction more typically found in early childhood classrooms in which basal readiness materials prescribe the reading program (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Through systematic basal approaches children are "taught" to read by programs prescribing teacher-led instruction which focuses on presenting predetermined skills in isolation and provides little opportunity for sustained reading and writing (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Clearly, a discrepancy exists between common practice and the whole language research base.

To help teachers develop whole language programs requires much more than introducing teachers to a few new types of classroom activities which they might use in planning learning experiences for their students (Teale, 1987). For many teachers, the move to establishing a whole language program may be a move they wish to make. However, they may have great difficulty in doing so because whole language is based on a different understanding of the process of learning literacy than that held by readiness

programs. For example, Jalongo & Ziegler (1987) suggest that teachers' differing perceptions of literacy development contribute to the difficulty of implementing whole language research-findings into classroom practice. Do teachers perceive children's learning as occurring through active hypotheses building through immersion in meaningful text, or do teachers view literacy learning as occurring through mastery of a predetermined sequence of skills?

To change one's teaching to reflect the newer reconceptualization of the reading process is a difficult task for many experienced teachers (Duffy & Roehler, 1989). The difficulty of teacher change seems particularly pertinent when helping teachers move from a skills-based to whole language-based instruction. For example, Taylor, Blum, and Logsdon (1985) found only one-half of the kindergarten teachers with whom they worked were able to implement whole language practice into their classrooms. They suggest that difference in beliefs among the classroom teachers and a whole language approach toward teaching may explain why some teachers could not change. Research by Harste (1977) and Mangano and Allen (1984) has also documented difficulties teachers have in providing more holistic, less skills-based lessons when they continued to believe in the importance of providing sequenced skills

lessons. Our own research in which we have worked closely with individual kindergarten teachers attempting to develop more holistic language instruction further illustrates the difficulty teachers have in reformulating their understanding of the process of learning to read and then restructuring their classroom teaching (Bruneau, 1989; Bruneau & Ambrose, in progress).

We designed this study as an outgrowth of our own work as university-based teacher educators. As we interact with classroom teachers within buildings in which we supervise student teachers, as we teach graduate classes which focus on literacy development in young children, and as we develop collegial relationships with teachers through professional development schools, we find teachers interested and concerned about developing a more holistic approach toward literacy instruction. As an initial effort to help us begin to understand our community of early childhood teachers, we designed this study to help us explore the current perceptions of whole language instruction held by the group of teachers with whom we work. The following questions framed the study: (1) How do teachers of young children define a whole language program; (2) What kind of whole language activities have the teachers tried in their classroom? How did the teachers feel about the outcomes of

the activities they used; (3) What concerns did the teachers have about whole language instruction; and, (4) What kind of assistance did the teachers believe would be helpful to them as they begin to make changes in their literacy program.

Method

Data Collection and Analysis

A survey was designed to assess a general level of knowledge and concerns about whole language programs among kindergarten-second grade teachers teaching in a rural or a suburban midwestern school district (Appendix A contains a sample of the survey). Because we did not want to present teachers with pre-determined categories of information, open-ended questions were written to best obtain the teachers' perceptions of whole language instruction (Spradley, 1979). Twenty-eight surveys were returned.

Using the process of categorical analysis (Spradley, 1979), we read the survey responses for domains or categories of information. The domains were then organized into taxonomies. Themes were the organized in relation to each of the research questions and these themes will be reported as findings of the study.

Findings and Discussion

Definitions of Whole Language

As might be expected, responses to this question were varied. However, three consistent themes appeared. First, many teachers noted the importance of integration of learning experiences in their definitions such as "Centering all subject areas around a topic of the week or month." Several teachers further stated whole language involved the integration of the language arts, "It's integrating speaking, listening, reading, and writing through all subject areas."

Secondly, an emphasis of "meaningful" engagement with curricula activities derived from a child centered focus was frequently expressed. "It's a child centered language rich program in which children learn through meaningful activities," was typical. Further, several teachers added whole language experiences should "personally involve children" and "relate to their (children's) own experiences."

A third theme reflected the perception of whole language as a different approach to teaching basic skills. "A program that develops reading and writing skills using the child's current language" and "the teaching of language skills as one unit" were typical "skills-based responses."

Of particular interest, all but one of the respondents described whole language programs in relationship to classroom practices as opposed to a set of beliefs. Given that teachers are directly engaged with children, what they actually do in their classrooms may influence their thinking about specific programs more so than their conceptual or philosophical orientations of practice.

Learning About Whole Language Instruction

More than half of the survey respondents wrote that they had initially learned about whole language programs through local universities. Direct university influences reported included undergraduate coursework, and graduate workshops or coursework. Indirectly, teachers wrote they heard about whole language through contact with student teachers and college supervisors.

The second most frequent response indicating initial information was workshops sponsored by local and statewide professional organizations. One teacher responded, "I went to a 1985 state workshop--it changed my life."

Thirdly, teachers identified other teachers as important sources, both teachers within and in different districts. "A parent of a child in my room who is a teacher in another district told me what she was doing," responded one teacher. "I heard other teachers talking in the

lounge." Apparently, teacher-to-teacher conversation was an important means in which whole language ideas became available.

Whole Language Activities

There were over thirty different types of activities that respondents identified as whole language activities which they have used in their classrooms. These activities are listed in Table A.

[Insert Table A About Here]

Interestingly, the most frequently mentioned activities involved an emphasis on teacher-led instruction. For example, a most popular activity involved the teacher reading a story and children rewriting the ending. Other examples of teacher-led activities involve writing LEA's and poems, and reading children's literature.

The contrast between the teachers' responses in which they defined whole language as "meaningful" and including children's "experiences" does not appear to translate into classroom practice as reported by our sample. Examples of child initiated activities such as, availability of writing material in dramatic play areas, were not mentioned as whole language activities in the respondents' classrooms. Further, only one respondent identified a functional usage, writing teacher-child notes, as an activity tried in the

classroom. Although the teachers stated whole language builds on children's own experiences, most classroom activities were teacher initiated. The apparent lack of child initiated activities would appear to be contradictory with the teachers' definitions of whole language programs as including meaningful child centered activities.

The emphasis of teacher directed activities was further illustrated by those activities the teachers described in a positive manner. Writing class books or stories and rewriting a story presented to the children were the most frequently identified activities teachers described as working well for them in the classroom.

Although journal writing was identified as an activity that many of the respondents used in their classrooms, only one teacher identified journal writing as a successful whole language activity. Assuming the journal writing was mostly child directed without teachers "teaching" during this activity in a traditional sense (stand-up teaching), this doesn't appear to be surprising when compared to writing class books or rewriting story endings where teachers would have more input in the activity.

In fact, journal writing was most frequently mentioned as an activity that did not work well in the teachers' classrooms. "Journals are not as successful as I would

like. I guess my expectations are not realistic. I have a hard time accepting scribble," was one teacher's response to this question. Why the teachers found journal writing to be problematic would be an important area of further investigation.

Concerns About Whole Language

Unequivocally, concerns focused upon two specific areas. Skill development and evaluation of children's learning were presented as teacher concerns about whole language programs. Comments such as, "Children will not carry over skills they have learned, "Problem with sight vocabulary;" "Lack of teaching the basic skills needed for reading;" "Evaluation, what to look for;" and "Are we covering the needed skills?", suggested that whole language activities created a concern about the teaching and evaluation of basic reading skills. It would appear that the majority of teachers believed that whole language activities did not include the necessary instructional methods to enable children to develop basic reading and writing skills. This concern becomes paramount when teachers try to assess and evaluate whole language activities.

The apparent dichotomy involving concern over using whole language activities and questioning whether skills are being learned may be resolved in teachers' minds if they combine whole language activities with a skill-based reading program. Our current observations of kindergarten teachers' classroom practice suggest that this may be happening (Bruneau & Ambrose, in progress). Teachers may believe that whole language approaches are appropriate forms of practice but shouldn't be exclusively used for instructional delivery. For example, one teacher wrote:

> "I am enthusiastic about it (whole language approaches). I still plan to use an alphabet letter of the week. I know some university profs hate that. I have used it with whole language. With our all-day everyday plan, we can do more. If I stiffle the student's creativity, I'm sorry. The letter of the week is also an instrument of communication between school and home. I believe that this communication is important particularly the first year in schools."

Despite the apparent contradiction of whole language approaches and skill-based reading programs--when considering ways of viewing how children become literate--teachers may combine the two approaches without reflecting upon the apparent contradictions and apply bits and pieces of whole language practice while maintaining an overall skills-based practice orientation.

Kinds of Assistance Requested

Workshops were most frequently suggested as meaningful ways to further teacher knowledge concerning whole language activities. Sharing sessions including workshops and opportunities to meet with other teachers and/or observe their classrooms, were also cited as ways teachers wish to further develop whole language activities. Two teachers mentioned accessibility to whole language resources such as textbooks, studies, and books that describe whole language approaches in early childhood education classrooms.

Of particular interest, university coursework or school district in-services were not suggested by the teacher as a method for assistance in supporting whole language programming. Perhaps, what teachers desire is practical "how to" approaches which can be delivered in workshop formats. However, if conceptual understanding of whole language approaches and understanding one's belief system in regards to emerging literacy is a goal, then more elaborate forms of examination of practice and reflection would be necessary. How this can best be facilitated given teachers' busy lives is another important area of needed research.

Implications of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore early childhood education teachers' perceptions and use of whole language via an open-ended questionnaire. It appears that most teachers from this small sample accept whole language instruction as being effective means of instruction, but as a supplement to a skills-based reading approach. It seems imperative that whole language advocates need to address teachers' beliefs concerning how children become literate. Without doing so, whole language activities may be viewed as additional instructional experiences which are "fun," but not a means for developing capable literate children. Offering examples of whole language or modeling such practices for teachers is important. However, without examination and reflection on such practice, teachers may not develop ability to make decisions about their teaching in a thoughtful manner and whole language approaches may be perceived to be the "latest kick" (one respondents comment) of university schools of education.

Table A

TYPES OF WHOLE LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES

Most Frequently Mentioned (5 or more responses)

journal writing-
class stories
writing poems
making charts, lists
reading children's literature
big books

Frequently Mentioned (3 or 4 responses)

making books
invented spelling

Mentioned (1 or 2 responses)

label objects in classroom
theme activities
reading stories
reading poems
sustained silent reading-
lots of books
publishing
books available
LEA's
sentence strips
using poems to teach skills
plays
reader's theater
process writing-
choral reading
puppets-
rewriting predictable stories
unit planning
oral language, brainstorming discussion
comparing stories
predictable books
listening center-
writing area-free choice-
teacher-child notes
modeling writing

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Appendix A

Whole Language Survey

1. How would you define a whole language program?

2. How did you first learn about whole language approaches?

3. What kinds of whole language activities have you tried in your classroom?

4. What language activities worked well for you? Why do you think so?

5. What activities didn't work well? Why do you think they might have been difficult?

6. What concerns do you have about a whole language program?

7. What information or assistance would you like to have about developing more whole language activities in your classroom?

Any other comments about whole language problems? Please list on back.